

The University of Chicago

THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF BRIGHAM YOUNG

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
HUMANITIES IN CANDIDACY FOR THE
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

1937

By
CARL J. FURR

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Brigham Young, successor to the Prophet Joseph Smith and first Governor of Utah, has left to the Mormon people a rich history of how various religious ideas could be bound together into a consistent form with pressing daily problems. He is recognized today by thinking men and women as one of the foremost colonizers and social organizers of American history. The methods he used in conquering the deserts and making them yield to the wants of men have set a precedent for reclamation projects. The philosophy which led to his ability to guide and organize people of different creeds and nationalities has been the topic for this study. The chief source of materials for this study was Volumes I-XIX of the Journal of Discourses by Brigham Young, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, His Two Counsellors, The Twelve Apostles, and Others, published in Liverpool, 1854-1878.

The world significance of the labors of Brigham Young, and the universal applicability of his methods, under modern conditions, make it certain that the work he accomplished was not due to his gigantic personality, but the success achieved must have been due to the possession of a life philosophy of such depth and extent as to meet the varying needs of his fellow men. Throughout his life he maintained that it was the possession of the Gospel that enabled him to perform his wonders. He was a spiritual teacher and a material leader. His profession of faith made him the man he became, and he used the revealed words of the Prophet Joseph Smith to assist him in guiding the pioneers in all their affairs.

This study has been an attempt to delineate the system of philosophy which he so tenaciously held and courageously taught, and by which he was able to win success for his people. His philosophy is clear and unmistakable in its purpose. His ideas were those which had captured him at the dawn of his mission, ideas which he had tested through all sorts of adversity and success. It is doubtful if Brigham Young ever wrote out a sermon or set

down any of his ideas. They came to him on the spur of the moment as they were inspired by some condition or need of the hour. One marvels at the consistency of his works. Only on rare occasions does one find conflicts in his opinions; he changes his ideas when they grow old and useless. He does not hesitate to admit he must change or alter a previous view. This makes his philosophy flexible and easily understood. Although he did not have the opportunity of much formal education, his sermons and thoughts show a wide knowledge of men and affairs and an excellent power to use the English language clearly and forcefully.

Brigham Young came from Pilgrim-Puritan ancestry of the New England States. He fell heir to the views of Protestantism and became a religious zealot. He did not become emotional over religion, but rather allowed religion to act as a tool to assist him in understanding human nature and later on in his life to be the motive power behind his adventurous ideas of establishing the Kingdom of God in the Rocky Mountains. He became a convert to the revealed Gospel of Joseph Smith and showed the influence of Smith on him throughout his life.¹ Young chose his assistants with skill.² Men whose special qualities fitted them for some particular task in building Zion. He did not allow himself to become over-enthusiastic about angels and supernatural powers; he was content to deal with the problems at hand and along lines of "natural philosophy" or "natural principles."³ He believed in applying sensible, every-day remedies to social problems and allowing the next world to take care of itself.

Young made no distinction between life and religion. Religion was merely a way of living; the best religion was that which conducted the individual into the happiest realms of life. He thought that life was a continuation of time and matter in space.⁴ He felt that his special mission was to help his fellow man magnify his sojourn here on earth by teaching him true principles of life based on the revelations of Joseph Smith. A full

¹Journal of Discourses, I, 39.

²T. Edgar Lyons, "Orson Pratt" (Unpublished Master's thesis, Divinity School, University of Chicago, 1932); John Henry Evans, Charles Coulson Rich (New York: Macmillan, 1936).

³Journal of Discourses, III, 209; IV, 22.

⁴Ibid., XII, 228; X, 22.

life meant that one had learned to secure righteous fulfillment of all his desires.¹ Salvation for Young was a temporal achievement, in which the soul (consisting of spirit and an earthly body) might harmoniously integrate itself with all the forces of the universe, natural and supernatural. He did not often paint glorious pictures of a heaven to be enjoyed in an after life. His heaven was a place on earth where men shared each other's joys and all mutually worked for the greatest good of all mankind.² He saw in his pioneer Saints a chosen people of God but he never allowed them to divorce themselves from the rest of the world. He guided the persecuted converts to Utah territory, not to escape from the world but to secure a foothold, so that they might become a mighty people and a salvation to the world.

In Mormon teachings there is nothing that has shaped man's ideals on earth like the conception of God. The Mormon believed in a personal God, of body, parts, and passions. God is the eternal Father of countless millions of spirit-children. He is a man made perfect through His ability to expand and progress.³ "As man is, God once was, and as God is man may become," is a fitting epitome of the Mormon conception of eternal progression. God is ruler of forces acting upon man and the universe. Man being a God in embryo leads one to assume that there are many Gods. Brigham Young advocates this teaching and justifies it by the law of eternal progression.⁴ He uses Adam as a type of man who has almost reached godhood.⁵ Adam is conceived of as an individual who has been brought from another planet; he was placed on this earth for the purpose of starting off the human race.

The Kingdom of God is God's system of government. It is cosmic in scope, including natural and social regulations. Jesus is accepted according to the Christian tradition as the Son of God. Young believed that Jesus is to be the supreme king of this earth and mankind will be his subjects.⁶ The messianic hope is

¹Ibid., I, 353. ²Ibid., XI, 95; X, 171; XIII, 60; XI, 18.

³Ibid., IV, 27; IV, 29; XIII, 309; III, 259.

⁴Ibid., X, 192; XI, 249; VII, 333.

⁵Ibid., I, 50; II, 6; III, 319.

⁶Ibid., VII, 144; XII, 59; VIII, 153.

important with Brigham Young. The Saints were pressed for time to prepare the temple and warn mankind of the Second Coming.¹ The third member of the divine hierarchy is the Holy Ghost, a personage of spirit. His special duties are to inspire man to creative living and to act as mediator between God and man.² The mission of the Holy Ghost is not limited to the Mormons; anyone who is seeking truth may find himself suddenly in possession of supernatural understanding. The Father, His Son Jesus, and the Holy Ghost form the official trinity. Associated with these three are legions of angels and spirits. Young accepted their presence as a matter of fact. He talked familiarly about the closeness of angels and the influence they had upon man and his accomplishments. All spirits are offspring of God; they are waiting in the spirit world for an opportunity to be born into a mortal body so that they might have a chance to progress and achieve exaltation.³

Brigham Young believed in forces of good and evil. Those values in life which were pleasant and assisted man to secure fulfillment of his desires were called good and were direct results of God's intervention to help His spirit-children. Those forces provocative of injury or hindrance were called evil and proceeded from Satan through God's permission. Evil is a disciplinary power imposed upon man to prove and test him. Young argued that man must taste the bitter in order to appreciate the sweet.⁴ Sin is going against any of the established rules for smooth living. Anything or act that tends to retard the growth of the Kingdom is sin. The forces of sin must be studied so that the individual will not become unwittingly subjected to evil. Evil spirits are present everywhere to tempt man and to lead him astray. These spirits are condemned to a bodiless existence and are about in the world seeing if they might find some weak good spirit in order to possess its mortal body.⁵

Brigham Young's conception of man and the world is quite unique. Man is the highest creation of God; the good earth is his home. Man is born into a body of flesh so that he might have a tool with which to carve for himself a niche among the gods.

¹Ibid., VIII, 115.

²Ibid., VI, 95.

³Ibid., IV, 218; XII, 245; XIX, 66; XI, 13.

⁴Ibid., V, 294.

⁵Ibid., VI, 73-74.

He is foreordained for eternal progression and eventual godhood.¹ Man is intelligent matter acted upon by divine powers. In order to fulfill his function as a God, man must learn by experience the techniques inherent to running a universe and propagating it with celestialized offspring.² As God the Father is a just man made perfect, so man is a potential God seeking perfection. Young's conception of God was not one of caveats and aloofness, but one of paternal relationship. God was respected as a divine Father. This respect made man feel secure and snug in the face of adversity. Man is a partner with God in making the earth a joyous place for spirit children. The whole conception of the relationship of man to God and God to earth was one of mutual assistance and sharing. God was happy when the Saints obeyed His counsels. Man was happy when he was in harmony with his environment. The world is considered as a good place. It was brought into being through God's power and will acting on unorganized matter. All things are made of matter; their shape, function, and state depending on the organization of matter. Man who is to become immortalized and eventually celestialized must have a place equal to him in glory. Brigham Young taught that this earth will be man's home throughout eternity, or until he is transferred to some sphere of his own. The earth, then, must undergo a purification and become sanctified before man in his exalted state can dwell upon it.³ The earth is not to be cursed and despised, it is to be understood and made to harmonize with man's desires for a full-orbed life. Man could never show progress if he were placed on a perfected earth; his work is to perfect the land, mountains, and earth-life so that the earth may become fit for immortal inhabitants.⁴

Brigham Young diverges somewhat from the Christian tradition regarding death. He interpreted death as a new birth, an opportunity to enter into a new life.⁵ Future life was depicted as a state of existence much the same as this life. People would walk about and converse with one another, wear clothing and eat

¹Ibid., VII, 2-3.

²Ibid., I, 5; IX, 242.

³Ibid., VI, 145; XI, 43.

⁴Ibid., I, 39; XIII, 248; II, 302; VIII, 83; I, 274.

⁵Ibid., VII, 240-41.

food.¹ The Millennium will not be so different from conditions now existing. It will be a period of great activity on the part of the Saints because it will involve all the preparations for the day of judgment.² Work for the dead will be increased a thousand fold.³ Satan will be bound and nothing will hinder man from going ahead and fulfilling his mission. Young's idea of hell was one of a state of mind; a sort of feeling and knowledge that one has missed certain blessings and opportunities. Hell is an eternal thing and punishment for sin is eternal, although the sinner will not be required to spend all his time in atoning for evil deeds. When the sin has been paid for, then the individual will be free to continue on the road to eternal progression, obviously retarded but free to exalt himself.⁴

Brigham Young taught that man is free. His free agency was one of the initial gifts God gave to man when he was placed on earth. Young insisted that the Saints use it judiciously for the advancement of their own good. It showed God's faith and confidence in man to make proper choices and effect the highest type of life. Man must not disappoint God, hence every effort should be spent to learn the right way of living.⁵ Much is made of the Fall story and the fact that Adam chose wisely to fall from grace so that God's spirits might have an opportunity to secure bodies and eventually eternal exaltation.⁶ Young tried to show that the person who lived harmoniously with law was the free man.⁷ He went so far as to advocate extreme penalties in order to free man from crimes he committed. The doctrine of blood atonement accounts for this desire to free man from sin committed on this earth.⁸

¹Ibid., I, 203.

²Ibid., VII, 142; XV, 138; II, 316.

³Ibid., XVIII, 303; XVI, 165.

⁴Ibid., XI, 125; IX, 147.

⁵Ibid., X, 191; also The Eleventh Article of Faith of the Latter-day Saints.

⁶Ibid., II, 302.

⁷Ibid., III, 267.

⁸Ibid., III, 247; IV, 53; IV, 219-20.

Brigham Young's philosophy of life included miscellaneous ideas on government,¹ wealth,² family organization,³ war,⁴ propagation of the Gospel,⁵ and work for the dead.⁶ He kept himself in close contact with the social forces which act upon organized society. All the values making for man's contented life must be unified into a system with order. Young thought the restored Church of Jesus through Joseph Smith was a perfect system for realizing these values. Brigham Young was humanistic in his way of interpreting life. He saw everything in nature, heaven, and earth coöperating with man. The earth is not hostile to the man who understands how to control its forces. He was preëminently practical and did not hesitate to revamp old ideas into new form, or even discard them altogether. He was not tied down by tradition nor custom. Out in the Rocky Mountains he was the Leader, Prophet, and Spokesman for God. He made and unmade law to suit the contingencies of the day. He was not questioned by his followers, for he had their implicit faith and confidence. He rarely made mistakes; which added to his prestige as a divine man. He believed, with his pioneers, in the revelations of Joseph Smith and made the settlers feel that he, too, was struggling to live up to the glories of the restored Church. Brigham Young mingled with the poor and was a peer among the wealthy. His sole interest was to lift mankind from a state of ignorance to a plane of knowing that Jesus is the savior of the world and its inhabitants. Young emphasized mutual improvement by setting up ideals common to all struggling people.

His religious philosophy is his philosophy of life, a way of living harmoniously, happily, and creatively in a world which is good. It includes help from other worlds but not to the point where man is allowed to rely entirely on divine assistance. Man must make his own heaven and avoid his own hell. Young is not a

¹Ibid., VI, 343; X, 19; XII, 287.

²Ibid., XV, 35; IX, 172; XII, 56.

³Ibid., XIII, 320; XII, 120-21.

⁴Ibid., XIII, 149; VIII, 157; VII, 137.

⁵Ibid., IV, 58; IX, 124; XII, 34.

⁶Ibid., XVIII, 304.

philosopher in the technical sense of the word, but he did have a genius for thinking through problems clearly and effectively. After studying Brigham Young's period, the teachings of the first Prophet, the heterogeneous converts, his sermons and examples of his statesmanship, the unbiased is forced to conclude with Werner that "...Brigham Young is one of the few Americans deserving of the adjective great."¹

¹M. R. Werner, Brigham Young (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1925), p. 454.

